

A FUTILE QUEST FOR A SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIP IN WELTY'S SHORT FICTION

Daniel Lancaster, B.A.

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APPROVED:

Jacqueline Foertsch, Major Professor

David Kesterson, Committee Member

Stephanie Hawkins, Committee Member

David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of
English

Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse
School of Graduate Studies

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Eudora Welty is an author concerned with relationships between human beings.

Throughout *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*, *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, and *The Golden Apples*, Welty's characters search for ways in which to establish and sustain viable bonds. Particularly problematic are the relationships between opposite sexes. I argue that Welty uses communication as a tool for sustaining a relationship in her early work. I further argue that when her stories provide mostly negative outcomes, Welty moves on to illuminate the possibility and subsequent failure of relationships via innocence in the natural world. Finally, Welty explores, through her characters, the attempt at marginalization and the quest for relationships outside the culture of the South.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Welty's work, as she has said, is about "human relationships," often those between men and women (*One* 87). And by her accounts, Welty's parents, her first significant model, experienced a mutually devoted relationship. She remembers the embodiment of their relationship in her book *One Writer's Beginnings*: "When my father was dying in the hospital, there was a desperate decision to try a blood transfusion.... Then a tube was run from [my mother's] arm to his" (92). If we read the devotion between her mother and father as a metaphor for the desperate attempt by a woman and man to connect with one another, it is not strange, then, that many relationships in Welty's short fiction are literary models of men and women attempting to establish a connection and sustain a relationship.

In the cross section of short stories examined in this essay, each deals with men and women attempting to sustain their respective relationships. I present a natural grouping of stories which helps illustrate Welty's use of different narrative angles from which to examine her characters' quests, as well as the location of different narrative devices in the stories, which the characters utilize in their attempts at viable relationships. That is to say, the stories are grouped in order of publication date (and, roughly, conception date). By doing so, the reader can more easily see the thematic progression from "A Piece of News," "The Key," and "Death of A Traveling Salesman," published in *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* 1941, to "At The Landing" published in *The Wide Net* 1943, to "Sir Rabbit," "The Whole World Knows," and "Music from Spain," published in *The Golden Apples* 1949.

“A Piece of News,” “The Key,” and “Death of A Traveling Salesman,” are stories of attempts by men and women to connect with their partners of the opposite sex via language or communication. Hence, communication is the tool that Welty uses in her early narratives, or the communication stories, as I will refer to them. The stories are a negotiation for a semblance of understanding, if not equality in a relationship. The barrier to that equality is the culture of the South.

“At The Landing,” published roughly half way between the communication stories and those found in *The Golden Apples* marks a turning point in Welty’s short fiction. Where the communication stories are, in the end, futile in each couple’s quest for a sustainable relationship, each story reveals a notion that a connection remains possible, yet the connection cannot solely rely on communication. The stories allude to the need for innocence, which, according the stories can be found in human nature. “At The Landing” serves as a fence, or a stile, to use Welty’s vernacular, that separates the lingering hope for equality and connection in the communication stories with the power-grabbing in “Sir Rabbit,” “The Whole World Knows,” and “Music from Spain,” or the power struggle stories, as I will refer to them in whole. “At The Landing” retains, albeit reduces, the thematic overtones of communication but focuses mainly on the idea not fully developed in the communication stories—that human nature consists of an innocence which would facilitate a connection between men and women, save that it is corrupted by Southern Culture. “At The Landing” is the examination of the removal of Southern Culture and whether or not said removal will allow men and women to form a connection based on the intrinsic equality in human nature. The story systematically explores this theory and systematically disproves it. The outcome of “At The Landing,”

unlike the communication stories, is completely negative. Neither, communication nor human nature is a viable tool for which Welty's characters to use in their efforts to sustain relationships.

In turn, the conclusion of "At The Landing" allows for a different type of struggle to take place in the last three stories discussed in this essay. Instead of men and women attempting to establish equal footing in order to form a connection and a sustainable relationship, Welty's characters' attempt to establish power over one another. For these latter characters, the only way to sustain a relationship is through one person's dominance over the other. The outcomes of these power struggle stories are essentially the same as the communication stories and "At The Landing." The quest for a sustainable relationship between a man and woman is futile. The outcomes display such futility through female subjugation, thwarted attempts at power appropriation, and destructive marginal leanings.

The thematic progression of Welty's stories as they appear from the early to late 40s displays what I believe is an author's narrative exploration of the viability of healthy, sustainable relationships between men and women. It appears that Welty works through the possibilities of relationships as she travels from the innocent hope of the communication stories to the misanthropic conclusions of the power struggles stories. It is helpful to think of the triad of story groups as a vin diagram. "At The Landing" represents its own group and is the center circle. The communication stories overlap from the left, as do the power struggle stories from the right. Each grouping contains themes from the previous group of stories, yet each grouping also contains unique versions of the same conclusion—futility.

The communication stories lay the groundwork for Welty's escalating social commentary, but, as Peggy Prenshaw reminds us in her essay "The Political Thought of Eudora Welty," the author did not feel it her place, or any other author's, to act as a "social or political crusader" (Prenshaw 617). Prenshaw further argues, "[Welty's] fiction displays a persistent regard for political negotiation but [locates it]...in the private sphere" (Prenshaw 617). This is true of Welty's early work, the communications stories, in which her concerns are presented more subtly than, perhaps, O'Connor's. They are less overtly socio-political didacticisms—more observational sketches. In this same vein, the problems of communication in Welty's early stories are less centered on a repressive masculine verbiage and more closely focused on the fact that "men and women live in different linguistic cultures" (Yeager 955).¹ I maintain that this mode of thought changes with and as a result of "At The Landing," and the subsequent power struggle stories in *The Golden Apples* contain more pungent social commentary, appropriately located it in the public sphere.

The theme that underscores all three story groups presented in this essay is that of a chasm between men and women. Historically, separation of the sexes was perhaps never more evident than in the United States South during the early half of the twentieth century. Welty had a front row seat. But why, in the South, did men and women have so much difficulty connecting? No doubt much of the problem stemmed from archaic views of female subordination, and from churches that established "Victorian norms" in the "last decades of the [nineteenth] century," churches that simultaneously held the

¹ This quote is taken from Patricia Yeager's discussion of Hélène Cixous' theory in Yeager's essay "Because a Fire Was in My Head": *Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination*. While Yeager's essay is concerned mostly with Welty's appropriation of a Masculine-centric language, her terminology and astute discussion of language are more than tangential to my essay. Also, I am not implying that Welty's stories are in no way concerned with a masculine-dominated language.

community together while dividing it (McMath 288). Robert McMath, in his essay “Community, Region, and Hegemony in the Nineteenth-Century South,” makes the observation that these churches reinforced community division according to money and race, but I argue the division between the sexes was also reinforced by these churches. And while Welty does not cite the church directly as part of the problem with in her communication stories, it is important to recognize its influence on Southern Culture and realize its heightened significance in “At The Landing” and the power struggle stories. The South was a region where the church was a woman’s most prevalent (or sometimes only) social interaction. Therefore, the idea of division was easily encoded.²

The South’s unique economy was also to blame. Since most of the South was rural during the early 1900s, men generally worked in the fields away from the women during the daylight hours. Even when women joined them, the labor was not conversational. When women did not join the men in the fields, they still worked all day. When the men came in from the fields, there were meals that remained to be cooked and children that remained to be taken care of. The two sexes simply did not know each other; they did not have time to learn how to connect—a point Welty directly cites throughout her stories.³ One might view this as a generalization, but it is said about Welty’s native state, “most generalizations about the South went double for Mississippi” (Reed 143). Welty uses this South as impetus and character in her fiction. She retranslates it, as Danièle Pitavy-Souques states, into the “most secret, most life giving or death giving characteristics” of her fiction (98). The focus in Welty’s early work about

² See Roydhouse, “*Big Enough to Tell Weeds from the Beans*”: *The Impact of Industry on Women in the Twentieth-Century South*.

³ See Blackwelder’s *Women and Leadership: A Century of change in the South* and Reed’s *Southern Culture: On the Skids?*

connecting via communication is on the destructively secret and ultimately fatal characteristics of the South. In “At The Landing,” those southern characteristics are steadily removed, and the results of “At The Landing” pave the way for the power struggle stories to show that those characteristics are inevitable and universal. The separation of the sexual worlds is thoroughly dissected the three story groups.

It is also evident by Welty’s letter to Virginia Woolf that loneliness was on her mind while writing the three communication stories.⁴ Welty also tells her confidant and agent in a letter sent during same time period, “ ‘I am one of those who believe that to communicate is the hope and purpose and the impulse and the test & value of all that...is done at all, and...[if communication is not accomplished]...it’s the same as being left confined within ourselves’ ” (qtd. in Marrs 69). Perhaps this is why the three stories discussed in the first part of this essay are powered by Welty’s preoccupation with isolation and infused with the notion that communication is the tool with which to transcend the respective worlds of the sexes.

“A Piece of News,” “The Key,” and “Death of A Traveling Salesman,” best depict the attitude that pervades much of Welty’s earliest work: communication between man and woman is vital to a successful relationship. Welty takes her characters to the brink of that communicatory connection. However, the characters in these three stories are unable to break through their solipsistic walls. As Reine Bouton verbalizes in Finding a Voice: The Desire for Communication in Eudora Welty’s *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*, they “fumble along and increase their isolation through their inability to communicate” (Bouton 2).

⁴ See Suzanne Marrs Eudora Welty: A Biography, 38.

Though “Death of A Traveling Salesman” was published before “A Piece of News” and “The Key,” it is placed last in relation to these three stories in the compellation *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*. The placement is important because it allows for a thematic progression that starts with “A Piece of News” and ends with “Death of A Traveling Salesman.” While “A Piece of News” presents the problem of communication, including Southern culture as a barrier, and a momentary epiphany—even a glimmer of sagacity in youth and innate human innocence—there is no character who holds the secret to communication, although there is what can be seen as foreshadowing to the mystical stranger who resides in “The Key,” the second story in the progression. “The Key” maintains the theme from “A Piece of News,” as well as the evidence of Southern Culture as a barrier, but also introduces a mystical figure with whom the secret is located, the red-headed stranger. “The Key” also develops Welty’s notion of innocence, from the significance of young adults to the all-important purity of children. “Death of A Traveling Salesman” builds on the themes of the first two stories, but where “The Key” contains a singular guiding character and “A Piece of News” contains no such character, “Death of A Traveling Salesman” displays two characters in possession of the coveted knowledge. These two characters not only hold the knowledge, but, because of their relationship, they are evidence, example, and hope for the ability of a man and woman to communicate and therefore form a connection. Again, this story continues the allusions to human innocence. Even more, though, where the stranger in “The Key” passively imparts the momentary connection, the woman in “Death of A Traveling Salesman” does so actively, which indicates Welty’s acknowledgement that

something more is needed while simultaneously validating the progression of heightened hope throughout the first three stories.

The thematic progression of the communication stories is an inverse microcosm to the three story groups' progression as a whole. The communication stories build off of one another until they reach their limited potential, yet they hint at some form of hope. At this point, something other than communication is needed to form a bond between the sexes. Thus "At The Landing" actualizes the hopeful theory of human innocence and eventually disproves it, detracting from the crescendo of hope arrived at by the end of the communication stories.

Specifically, the communication stories discussed in the first chapter each portray the search for a connection between a man and woman by way of communication. Each story takes the reader to the verge of a breakthrough. The sad adulteress, Ruby, finds herself face to face with her husband, Clyde, in "A Piece of News," "some possibility [of communication standing] between them" (Welty, *Curtain* 30). In "The Key," the potential to communicate is symbolized when Albert and Ellie, despite being hearing-impaired, hope to together "hear Niagara Falls" (70). Even R.J. Bowman, ever-the-pitch-man from "Death of A Traveling Salesman," realizes "it is necessary...[t]o talk" to the strange woman he encounters (239). Despite the shared possibility of communication, each story also shares the outcome of failure.

While these early stories can stand by themselves as representations of one mode of thought by Welty, their failures as much as their allusions to hope form a foundation from which to explore the male/female relationship in other parts of Welty's fiction. After all, as Welty says of Faulkner we should say of her, "They ought to know by now,

though, that [Welty's] work is a whole" (*Place* 545). And if "A Piece of News," "The Key," and "Death of A Traveling Salesman" are viewed as such a foundation, there are other stories that stand in relation as intriguing offshoots, adjustments, and corrections to these early stories.

Four such stories perform precisely these functions. Where the previous three early stories dwell on the failure of communication undercut with theoretical ovations to human innocence, "At The Landing," "Sir Rabbit," "The Whole World Knows," and "Music from Spain" are indicative of a deviation in mood in Welty's short fiction. "At The Landing" serves as the beginning of this deviation in mood, as well as the beginning of a more pessimistic series of outcomes. It tests the hypothesis that the innocence of youth allows for a connection that age and experience prohibit and that Southern Culture is a barrier to male/female intimacy.

Welty's innuendoes of innocence providing the solution to the void between man and woman is similar to the Romantic arguments of Jaques Barzun, Morse Peckham, and R. P. Adams. All focus on the ideas of innocence, individuality, pantheism, and a return to nature.⁵ In this tradition, "At The Landing" is an exploration of the hope alluded to in the communication stories—a Romantic case study—and its setting and plot conform perfectly to the notion of Romanticism in Welty's time. But, it is Northrop Frye's notion of the green world as a separate environment subject to its own rules and unimpeded by cultural mores that Welty utilizes most effectively. She using the Natural World, as I will call it, as a Petri dish to study the theory she alludes to in the communication stories.⁶

⁵ See Morse Peckham's *Toward a Theory of Romanticism* and R.P. Adams' *Romanticism and the American Renaissance*.

⁶ See Northrop Frye' *Anatomy of Criticism*. For more interpretation of the natural world as it pertains to Eudora Welty, see Barbara Harrell Carson's *Eudora Welty's Tangles Bank*.

As “At The Landing” seems to give Welty’s theory of innocence endless chances to withstand scrutiny, in the end, Jenny and Floyd, while exempt from Southern Culture and enveloped in an innocent and purified environment, cannot establish a lasting connection. The outcome of their relationship resembles those of Ruby and Clyde, Albert and Ellie, and Bowman and the strange woman. Where the previous characters experience a breakdown because of the inability to communicate, which results from the burden of experience and Southern Culture, the children in “At The Landing” experience a breakdown mainly because, according to Welty’s story, the ideals that innocence can facilitate relationships and that Southern Culture is the prohibitive social construct to relationships are each proven false. Southern Culture is a guise for innate human characteristics, thus disproving the ideal of innate human innocence.

The outcome of “At The Landing” is brutal. It seems that, for Welty, the innate qualities of man are not pure. Her tone of hope via innocence dramatically shifts by the end of “At The Landing,” and the power struggle stories discussed in the latter part of this essay extend Welty’s misanthropic view.

After the first three stories fail in their quest for communication as a facilitator for a connection between men and women, and after Welty’s Natural World case study proves the brutality of human nature, the last story group further proves the transcendence of human nature and represents the endeavors of men and women to sustain relationships by establishing hierarchical roles. “Sir Rabbit” begins the power struggle trilogy and serves as a reiteration that a viable connection between the sexes cannot be reached. “Sir Rabbit” is Welty’s pessimistic interpretation of what happens when the nature of man, as explored in “At The Landing” eliminates the possibility for a

connection by limiting the female role in a relationship to that of complete subordination. Where the communication stories focus primarily on the separate linguistic cultures of men and women, “Sir Rabbit” deals more heavily with the subjugation of women and their subsequent appropriation of masculine properties as an attempt to gain power.⁷ If the first three stories are negotiations for a peaceful and equal connection between the sexes, the last three are battles between the sexes with each side struggling to overpower the other.

“Sir Rabbit” is also a look at the marginal figure of King MacLain and his surprisingly pedestrian sexual interaction with the young Mattie Will after she suffers the same brutal rape as Jenny suffers in “At The Landing.” Mattie Will turns her attention from the Natural World and the Cultivated World to a Preternatural World. Because she is desensitized by her prior rape experience, the equally disappointing sexual experience with King MacLain remains favorable based on the glamour and power which his marginal status entails.

“Sir Rabbit” delineates the erroneous human innocence, the subjugation of women in the South, the attempted appropriation of power by women as an attempt to usurp said subjugation, and the desire to escape into the margins of society. However, in the end, the margins do not provide an escape, and, just as “At The Landing” proves for Welty that innocence is nothing more than an idealistic mode of thought, “Sir Rabbit” reiterates that the oppressive nature of Southern Culture is not solely Southern, but human, and no amount of masculine appropriation or marginal leanings can change or

⁷ For specific interpretation of Welty’s appropriation of language in *The Golden Apples* in reference to W.B. Yeats see Patricia Yaeger’s “*Because a Fire Was in My Head*”: Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination.

avoid this. “The Whole World Knows” and “Music from Spain” reinforce Welty’s new ideas in different, yet similarly violent ways.

“The Whole World Knows” follows Randall MacLain, one of the twins who rapes Mattie Will in “Sir Rabbit.” Ran struggles with his estranged wife, Jinny, and her appropriation of masculine power as she becomes the dominant figure in their relationship. In an attempt to regain his perceived rightful gender role, Ran replaces Jinny with the weaker Maideen, the daughter of Mattie Will from “Sir Rabbit.” Ultimately, Ran is not satisfied and views Morgana, the hometown that epitomizes Welty’s South, as what causes him to feel the need for power over women and therefore prevents him from having a sustainable relationship. As “Sir Rabbit” suggests that counterculture is equally as corrupt as Southern Culture by placing the onus for dysfunctional relationships on King MacLain, a representation of counterculture, Southern Culture is proven again to be to be a result of human nature in “The Whole World Knows.”

Once again, the culprit for the power struggle between the sexes is not Southern Culture but human nature. Where “The Whole World Knows” differs from “Sir Rabbit,” as well as advances the thematic progression of the power struggle stories, is in the evidence of an empowered woman—Jinny. She is proof that power can be abused on either side of the sexual chasm.

“The Whole World Knows” also expands on the idea that Welty is no longer placing her social commentary in the private sphere. As the title suggests, the struggle between Jinny and Ran is public knowledge. But also, the struggle is mirrored throughout

the community in the games played at Jinny's parent's house and the new relationships each takes on.⁸

"Music from Spain" follows the other twin who raped Mattie Will, Eugene MacLain. Eugene has escaped the South and fled to San Francisco where he lives and is in a relationship with his former landlord, Emma. Like "The Whole World Knows" and "Sir Rabbit," the story takes place outside the confines of the couple's relationship; therefore, Welty is again dealing in the public sphere. Also like "The Whole World Knows" and "Sir Rabbit," the story is directly concerned with the appropriation of power. Eugene feels threatened by Emma and lashes out physically to reestablish his dominance and therefore sustain their relationship.

Unlike the previous two power struggle stories from *The Golden Apples*, "Music from Spain" deals directly with gender as a performance, which establishes a greater amount of distance between gender and sex. Unhappy with the gender performance that Emma maintains, Eugene establishes a relationship with a Spanish guitarist, who paints his fingernails, wears his hair long, and allows Eugene to lead him around by the arm while buying him meals. It is not until the Spaniard alters the relationship and chooses a dominant gender role that things change for Eugene.

Eugene realizes that it does not matter who usurps whom in a relationship and that roles may reverse and be altered at any time. The message is one of underlying equality and the solution is simply recognition of said equality. Unfortunately, just as the communication stories retreat from a positive outcome so too does "Music from Spain."

⁸ For further analysis of mirroring as it pertains to the MacLain twins see Gail Mortimer's *Memory, Despair, and Welty's MacLain Twins*.

Eugene cannot sustain the realization he has and regresses into gendered stereotypes when he sees Emma.

The communications stories, “At the Landing,” and the power struggle stories represent different stages in Welty’s search for an avenue to a viable and sustainable relationship. Welty moves from communication to human innocence but arrives at the constant and transcendent state of battle between the sexes. In the end no connection can be sustained.

Returning to the inspiration Welty may have found in her own life’s story, Welty’s mother lay on the hospital cot connected to her husband by a blood-filled tube. “The doctor made a disparaging sound with his lips” (Welty, *One* 93). Welty’s father had died. Welty says that her mother blames herself, but based on Welty’s indication that the knowledge was not available for proper blood transfusions at this time, it is clear Welty places the blame on ignorance. Likewise, her characters are simply ignorant of how to communicate their love to one another; they do not possess the knowledge of how to overcome the perceived gap between their sexes.

CHAPTER 2

ATTEMPTING TO CONNECT THROUGH COMMUNICATION: THE COMMUNICATION STORIES

In Welty's "A Piece of News," Ruby Fisher wrestles with the burden of isolation. She yearns for the type of intimate communication that a man and woman, she believes, should have—truthful communication. For Ruby, conversational language is the medium through which a connection between she and her husband, Clyde, can be established and sustained. For Welty, communication is the first tool for which to build a connection between man and woman that she explores in her literature.

When Ruby reads of a woman in Tennessee, who is also named Ruby Fisher, being shot in the leg by her husband, she sees this as an act of real emotion between two people, a conversation of actions. Ruby's perception of the shooting as communication is articulated when "Ruby reads the newspaper article, and says it aloud, like conversation" (Welty, *Curtain* 23). Prior to her discovery of the newspaper, Ruby merely "murmurs, sings, and talks to herself" (Bouton 55). In fact, Ruby feels so strongly for this communication that she desires it in its ultimate form, death: For, if her husband, Clyde, "were truly angry, might he shoot her through the heart?" (Welty, *Curtain* 26). "In death, Ruby would finally receive," not only "the [general] attention she craves," but, most importantly, the connection with Clyde that she craves (Bouton 60). Clyde would prove his love through jealous rage and she would be the result of Clyde's actions. The two would be infinitely connected through cause and effect—a permanently sustainable relationship.

It is evident why Ruby seeks to use the newspaper to instigate a conversation of violent actions when Clyde returns from the woods because, aside from his dinner order, he barely speaks to Ruby (Welty, *Curtain* 27). Ruby is starved for affection and seeks a drastic resolution. When Clyde finally asks Ruby a question, he dismisses her answer and accuses her of hitch-hiking again. In fact, Ruby hitch-hikes often, hoping to spend her afternoons committing adultery in an effort to experience a connection with a stranger—a connection that she does not share with Clyde. More importantly, however, she seeks to elicit a reaction of genuine anger from her husband. Instead, Ruby's actions only amuse Clyde. Yet Ruby sees the newspaper as proof that Clyde loves her and might communicate that love through jealous rage. Ruby feels so alone she cannot imagine another person sharing so much as her name and therefore believes the article is about her.

Ruby shows the newspaper to Clyde and he reacts to Welty's symbol for communication by calling it a " 'lie' " (29). Despite Clyde's dismissal, as a result of the newspaper, Ruby and her husband confront one another and are faced with the possibility of communicating, bridging the void between them:

[She] faced him, straightened and hard, and they looked at each other. The moment filled with their helplessness. Suddenly they both flushed with a double shame and a double pleasure. It was as though Clyde might really have killed Ruby and as though Ruby might really have been dead at his hand. Rare and wavering, some possibility stood timidly like a stranger between them and made them hang their heads" (30).

The brief flush that drains both their faces is the momentary realization of the possibility for a connection amidst their looming “vulnerability” (Bouton 62). The hanging of heads that follows is the shame of not preserving the connection. The shame causes Clyde to walk to the fire and burn the literal and figurative symbol for communication, the newspaper, thereby silencing the voice that revealed their vulnerability and returning to the safe, familiar walls of their respective consciousnesses. Clyde, it seems, will return to his woods and whiskey still, Ruby to her highway and empty cotton gin. To the field and kitchen they might as well return.

The reason for the futility of the couple’s confrontation is the burden of their individual sexes. Ruby and Clyde’s culturally-engrained sexual identities blinds them from each other’s non-verbal attempts at communication and, in turn, connection. Ruby’s “breasts [give] her pain” as she cooks dinner in an attempt to garner Clyde’s attention. Clyde’s “steamy silence, a knife and fork in his fists,” was his gender-typical reaction to Ruby’s ploy for attention (Welty, *Curtain* 28). And Welty leaves us no shortage of reminders of Ruby and Clyde’s sexual differences: she is compared to a pregnant young girl; he is described with phallic gun in hand. Moreover, the glimpse of communication Ruby visualizes is of Clyde with long “hair hanging to his shoulders,” not the sex-specific bald head he now exhibits (26). In order for the two to connect, they must become more similar, thus Clyde is effeminized with the long hair.

In the end, the storm passes. Ruby and Clyde, respectively compared to lightning and thunder, cannot quite exist in the same moment, just as lightning constantly precedes thunder. Neither can exist without the other, yet neither can exist on the same temporal

plane as the other. Clyde and Ruby cannot transcend the void between their sexes and therefore remain isolated.

Next, in Welty's triad of communication stories is the "The Key". In the story, Albert and Ellie are a married couple who, being deaf and mute, are seemingly communicatively impaired. One might expect to find in the story a didactic message, preaching the notion that one need not speak in order to genuinely communicate. Yet, as Prenshaw has warned, Welty's early stories alienate any reader who searches for such a heavy-handed social theme. Even their facial expressions and body language, like all non-impaired persons around them, cannot tell each other how they feel, "their faces stung, their bodies quietly uncomfortable" (Welty, *Curtain* 57). Non-verbal communication is equally futile in this story as their faces remain expressionless and bodies motionless.

Recognizing the void in their life, Albert and Ellie attempt to visit Niagara Falls where, if they "lean up against the rail, they "can hear Niagara Falls...with [their] whole sel[ves]" (70). Niagara Falls represents a destination at which to connect with each other and the potential ability to hear the falls, in turn, symbolizes the potential ability of Albert and Ellie to hear the love in each other, to communicate this love. Niagara Falls is also important for what it is not—it is not the South. And the South in this story is that same South where status quo provides the perception of peace as described in "The Key," "an uneventful day on the farm—chores attended to, woman working in the house, [man] in the field...so that you're full of yourself as a colt, in need of nothing, nothing in need of you" (69). Albert and Ellie are trying to escape the culture that separates men and women. In the end, however, they miss their train.

The parallel symbol to Niagara Falls is the key. The key belongs to a mysterious “stranger,” whose hair is “like a flicker of a match struck in the wind,” he is “separated...from everyone else” by his lack of “craving for communication” (59). Instead, the stranger seems to already hold the knowledge for such communication—the key. The stranger marks a shift in narrative from “A Piece of News.” The inability to communicate is still present, as is the South’s influence. But new in the story is a character representing hope, evidence that the knowledge of communication can be retained. In “A Piece of News” there is no actual stranger, but the germ of this character can be gleaned in the line, “some possibility stood timidly like a stranger between them” (30). Possibility is personified by a simile in “A Piece of News” and as a mystical person in “The Key.”

But it is also important to note where else this hope lies. Just as Ruby remembers the possibility of a connection between her and Clyde when he was younger with long hair, Welty constantly alludes to a notion of youthful innocence as a key to a connection. During one possible breakthrough between Albert and Ellie, the narrator describes Ellie as “the way she looked as a child” (70). At another brink of a connection, the two are compared to children, “cousins even” (66). And with the turn of the term “cousins” we are exposed to the reason Welty uses the child’s innocence as a safeguard for connecting via communication. As a child the differences between the sexes are not so apparent. Boys and girls are friends, not lovers, not focused on the *haves and have nots* stemming from archaic views of genitalia. Being cousins prevents this inevitable maturation process since social pressures of filling mating and gender roles are not applied to those related.

In a passive attempt to share his knowledge, the stranger drops the key and Albert recovers it. Upon doing so, “Albert turns to his wife and “with misplaced wonder and joy,” the two converse (62). Albert assumes that just because he found the key, they “would have more understanding” of each other (62). And while he shares the key with Ellie, he is correct: “she reached over...and laid her hand on his, touching the key...[and] they never looked around them, never saw anything but each other” (63). However, Albert’s unwillingness to continue to share himself with Ellie, which is revealed as he hides the key into his pocket, causes their connection to break. Secrecy causes the regression from communication.

Apparent redemption follows as the stranger walks over to the couple and in authoritative fashion stands over them. In response, Albert and Ellie begin “talking rapidly back and forth, almost as one” (66). However, the “talking seemed rather to dishevel Albert” and instead of communicating as lovers, they are merely drawn together out of fear (66). “It was the feeling of conspiracy” that brought them together, that caused them to talk, not what should have—love for one another (66). And thus the communication is not real. Yet, Welty underscores the potential for true communication in a line that distinguishes itself from the rest of the text via partial second person point of view: “He had almost shared it with her—you realize that” (67).⁹ If only Albert had continued to share the key with Ellie, they would have sustained their connection.

⁹ Reine Bouton points out in his dissertation, *Finding a Voice*, that “the narrator engages the readers [throughout the story] by addressing them as ‘you.’ ” Also, Bouton argues that the narrator is unreliable and thus any conclusions drawn about the story are tenuous (9). I find this objectionable because the narrator never gives us any reason to doubt her word. While the narrator does not describe the shape of the gestures, she does attribute meaning to specific gestures in time: “On his hands he said to her, ‘I found it’” (Welty 62). Bouton also claims that words such as “might,” “as though,” and “must” imply guessing by the narrator, but I maintain this is part of Welty’s style (10). The same words are used in “Death of A Traveling Salesman,” “It was as if she had shown him something secret,” and Bouton does not question the narrator in this instance. For Welty, in her earlier work the feeling of the situation is important, and thus is

Why are Albert and Ellie unable to communicate? Like Ruby and Clyde, “there is a gap between [their] sexual worlds” (Weston 74).¹⁰ Stereotypically, Albert feels that by not talking he “can be so peaceful and content” and that “everything takes care of itself,” the same feeling he might have in the fields (Welty, *Curtain* 69). Ellie, on the other hand, does attempt to *verbally* communicate, “Just try and tell her talking is useless, that care is not needed” (68). However, the end result is summed up in the lines about Ellie’s retreat within herself, “the secret and proper separation that lies between a man and a woman, the thing that makes them themselves, their secret life, their memory of the past, their childhood” (71, 72). Ellie finds her present reality saddening, and is happy to live in the past. Albert finds his present reality normal and is resigned to it. Welty reiterates the destructiveness of Albert’s view by halting their communication when Albert hides the key in his breast pocket. However, Albert believes if he were to share this key, share his thoughts and desires, if he were to communicate his feelings, “security will run away and leave [him]” (69). Like Clyde, Albert’s isolation is motivated by fear. And in the end, the stranger gives Ellie another key, but promptly sees “the uselessness of the thing he had done” (73). Now they each have keys to keep to themselves. Thus the chasm between them, between their sexes, cannot be bridged because of secrecy, a lack of communication and the deterrent to a connection.¹¹

“Death of A Traveling Salesman” is focused on communication between man and woman, but instead of a couple trying to find the secret to communication with one

equivalent to the truth. Furthermore, the stranger can speak, yet at the end of the story, the narrator claims that you “could see that he despised and saw the uselessness of the thing he had done” (73). The reader should not doubt the narrator’s mind-reading capabilities, but simply assume she is omniscient.

¹⁰ I realize that this quote is in reference to *The Optimist’s Daughter*, however I maintain that this is relevant as a larger thread in Eudora Welty’s work: “certain patterns in my work repeat themselves without my realizing it” says Welty (*One* 98).

¹¹ Yaeger states differently in *The Political Thought of Eudora Welty*: the stranger attempts to bridge a chasm between his world and theirs (620).

person attempting to guide the couple, there is a single man guided by a couple. R.J. Bowman, having not quite fully recovered from the flu, finds himself having lost his way in his attempt to reach Beulah. His isolation from women is alluded to when the narrator notes, “and if he thought of one woman he saw the worn loneliness that the furniture of the room seemed built of” (233). A salesman, Bowman is only able to communicate by trade.¹² Unable to tell his female nurse goodbye, he gives her “a really expensive bracelet” (232). Part of his problem is his gender, for “he [is] a man who always [wears] rather wide-brimmed black hats, and in the wavy hotel mirrors [looks] something of a bullfighter” (233). Bowman seems consumed by the distorted *machismo* he sees in the reflection of himself. Throughout the first few pages of the story, the reader discovers that Bowman is a lost soul “not close enough to anyone to call out” (233).

The story advances, and after becoming thoroughly lost, Bowman drives his car into a ravine. Having narrowly escaped his car prior to the fall, Bowman then finds himself at the front door of a rural house, at which he encounters a lady holding a “half blackened, half clear lamp” (236). Welty uses the image of the lamp to symbolize the two options in front of Bowman. He can choose to remain unclean and live in darkness, or he can choose to be cleansed and see the light, thus learning how to connect with the opposite sex. Bowman stumbles through the rest of the story, wavering in his choice for clarity and connection.

¹²It is interesting to think in regards to Welty’s own comment about the “certain patterns in [her] work [that] repeat themselves: “[S]ome of the characters in one story were . . . the same characters who had appeared already in another story. Only I’d written them originally under different names, at different periods in their lives, in situation not yet interlocking but ready for it” (Welty, *One* 99). The traveling salesman in “A Piece of News,” who gives Ruby a sample of coffee upon their separation, seems to be communicating the same way Bowman does with his nurse, shallowly reimbursing women for services rendered.

And at first, Bowman chooses the dark, judging the woman in his masculine terms as being strong because “of her quiet pose” (237). Like Albert, he views silence as beneficial. And the only words Bowman speaks are automated pitches from a salesman’s vocabulary, but moved by the woman he tries again, saying, “ ‘An accident—my car’ ” (237). Having come closer to pertinent communication, the woman responds to him. On his third try Bowman succeeds in true communication, telling her that he “ ‘was sick’ ” and is “ ‘not strong yet’ ” (237). Bowman’s confession of weakness indicates his willingness to set aside his conventional masculinity, indicated further when he lays “his big black hat over the handle of his bag” (237). At this point, he has taken off his figurative mask and attempts to communicate, choosing, for the moment, light.

Bowman realizes that in the woman’s house “it is necessary...[t]o talk,” but wavering again, he resorts to his salesman façade, “ ‘I have a nice line of women’s low-priced shoes’ ” (239). The woman ignores Bowman when he deviates in this direction. But when he chooses to ask a pertinent question, unknowingly, about the subject of communication, she answers, “ ‘Yes. We are alone’ ” (239). The woman’s answer is seminal. By saying, *we are alone*, Welty describes the knowledge of communication as arcane: “It was as if she had shown him something secret” (245). In fact, the secret was a “marriage, a fruitful marriage,” fueled by true communication (251).

The narrator’s description of the connection between Sonny and his wife as a “conspiracy” seems at first to be contradictory to the idea of “conspiracy” in “The Key,” as does the respective stories’ use of the term “secrets” (246). But the differences are actually not paradoxical. The conspiracy between Sony and his wife, in “Death of A Traveling Salesman,” is *between* the couple, implying a connection. More importantly,

the wife readily divulges her secret to Bowman and shares it with her husband. Albert, however, keeps his secret from his wife. The conspiracy, which leads to the futility of true communication between Albert and Ellie, is one that is kept from them by the outside world, driving them together out of fear. Thus, Albert and Ellie ‘talk’ because of their exclusion from the outside world, and Sonny and his wife communicate because of their inclusion of each other.

Furthermore, while the secret to communication is arcane with relation to the number of characters who share it, “[a]nyone could have it,” the reader is told (251). Bowman wonders “why the woman [does] not go ahead and clean the lamp” and continue to show him the light, to share with him the secret to connecting (240). It is because Bowman chooses not to hold on to the secret. Bowman wishes to tell the woman “how lonely” he is, that his heart “should be full,” and how it “should be holding love like other hearts,” but instead he says nothing (243). As a result, like Ruby and Clyde, Bowman feels “ashamed” that he fails to take advantage of the opportunity afforded him: “he might, in one more moment, have tried by simple words and embraces to communicate,” but he remains silent that isolated (244).

There are direct implications of the Southern culture in “Death of A Traveling Salesman,” as well: “And it was so still. The silence of the fields seemed to enter and move familiarly through the house....He felt that he was in a mysterious, quiet, cool danger” (239). The isolation of work and separation from a woman is alluded to here. Bowman recognizes this and wishes “to avoid even the mention of unknown men and their unknown farms” (239).

But more than the direct reference to the fields is the overall Southern attitude Bowman must shake. For instance, when he should sit quietly and listen to the woman, Bowman guiltily thinks that “a man should know enough to get up and walk around” (244). Also, Bowman finds himself lost because he stereotypically will not ask for directions, a heavily symbolic statement. Finally, Bowman instantly judges the woman as strong, not because of her personality and actions, but because of her silence, a statement that’s logic opposes the story’s moral, and in turn foreshadows other misconceptions Bowman has.

One such misconception is the woman’s age. Instantly Bowman misjudges the woman, seeing her as old. But the knowledge Welty locates within the woman, as is seen in the previous two stories, is one that belongs in youth. The ideal that the purity of youth is required to comprehend such a vital truth is carried from story to story and is not lost in “Death of A Traveling Salesman.” Thus, when Bowman has his momentary epiphany “of sudden communication” he sees her for the young woman she is (250).

“Death of A Traveling Salesman” marks the third movement in the trilogy, a movement that indicates a progression. If “A Piece of News” contains hope represented by the confrontation between Ruby and Clyde and “The Key” contains hope at the point where Albert and Ellie share the key, then “Death of A Traveling Salesman” takes the fleeting optimism one step further. Instead of depicting a lonesome stranger as the one who possess the secret for communication, “Death of A Traveling Salesman” displays a couple who experience the secret, a couple who connects and sustains their relationship. This couple actively, albeit mysteriously, attempt to show Bowman the *light*, and Bowman observes that anyone can have this secret. Even as an individual not in a

relationship, as in the first two stories, he is capable of communication. The promising moment is, however, fleeting, and Bowman, like Ruby, Clyde, Albert, and Ellie, cannot master “the ancient communication between two people,” (129).

Welty shows that a possible harmonic connection lingers at the feet of Ruby and Clyde, Albert and Ellie, and Bowman and his mystical teacher. And while Welty places the ancient ability to communicate in the hands of her mystical figures, each earthly character recognizes his or her chances. Each character leans over the precipice of those possibilities, and each character retreats from fear.

Welty’s communication stories are a warning that the walls of isolation which people erect do not protect them from the outside, but instead kill with the things they hold on the inside. Bowman’s symbolic heart attack acts as the ultimate example. Why are the attempted lines of communication between men and women never successful in these three early works from Welty? It is as if one sex is not ultimately compatible with the other. The time and place in which Welty lived and placed these stories was transfixed with a cultural consciousness that both passively viewed men and women as opposites and actively set up barriers for their connection. The wonderful attempts at communication are present, but the outcome is rejection.

However, to limit Welty’s scope to the South alone is to deny her ability “to show (or write) about human beings...[their]...universal feelings and the weight of their plight” (Pitavy-Souques 105). Perhaps one way to view Welty’s work as culturally transcendent is her invocation of the notion that the ultimate knowledge of how to communicate is in the child. It is the lack of cultural encoding that Welty sees thus far as the secret to communication and connecting—a state consciousness that precedes the

formation of a chasm. However, in the next story discussed in this essay, “At The Landing,” Welty disproves her own theory and replaces the reason for the barrier to a sustainable and viable connection between men and women on human nature, not Southern Culture.

CHAPTER 3

A TURNING POINT: THE THEMATIC REFRACTION IN “AT THE LANDING”

Where the first three stories are central in their focus on adult communication as a tool for forming a connection between men and women, laced with theoretical undertones of innocence, “At The Landing” is a case study on the ideal of youthful innocence as the key for a sustainable relationship with echoes of the previous communication theory. More to the point, “At The Landing” is a departure from Welty’s theme that communication can bridge the chasm between the sexes and an arrival at what was previously only an allusion that innocence and the eradication of Southern Culture are key steps in bridging the chasm.

The way in which Welty implements the Natural World needed for her case study is methodical in that she seems to say to the reader, *If this does not work, then watch when the stories goes one step further, one step further removed from Southern Culture and one step closer to pure human nature.* Her method refuses to allow any reservation when, in the end, her study arrives at a negative conclusion. Therefore, there are many backtrackings in the story as Welty passes closer and closer to the ultimate natural setting.

In this mode of repetitive unveiling, “At The Landing” contains an opening passage that, at first, seems to clear the way for a natural setting for the rest of the story. The passage regards the death of Jenny’s grandfather. His death is quickly followed by a flashback to a love story of Jenny and Billy Floyd. The eventual death and destruction of experience and Southern Culture, represented by the grandfather’s death and nature’s

increasing relevance, signifies Welty's end failure of the case study that is the initial flashback of Jenny and Billy Floyd's beginning relationship.

However, when the flashback is complete, and a true connection is not yet formed, Welty reintroduces Jenny and Billy Floyd's relationship. Yet, the relationship remains fruitless, and Welty pushes her characters, stage by stage, eventually completely submerging them into the Natural World. The details of the gradual submergence are the evidence of Welty's fervent attempt to exhaust all possibilities of her one-time hopeful ideals of innocence and, in turn, indicate a shift toward.

In the flashback, Welty places the interaction between Jenny and Billy Floyd in a field. The field lacks major cultivation in that it is not a working farm or ranch, although hints of human influence exist in human landmarks such as the stile on which Jenny sits. That there is no work done in the field, however, represents an absent form of Southern Culture that, as is evident in the communication stories, can separate men and women. Yet, despite the relative wilderness in which Floyd and Jenny find each other, only through further submergence into the Natural World and the total eradication of man-made religious dogma, as well as those who create and enforce it, can a purely natural world exist. And even after the deepest submersion into this world, the ideals of innocence cannot sustain the elusive connection Welty searches for throughout her fiction—primarily because they are proven erroneous in nature.

The first evidence that the cultivated world will be washed away is the delirious protest of Grandpa before he dies. The delusions are not simply ramblings of an old man who is afraid he will lose his house due to flood damage: "The night Jenny's grandfather died, he dreamed of high water....he made a complaint of it" (Welty,

Collected Stories 240). He is afraid that he will lose his dominant position. When Grandpa regrets that “Floyd’s catfish has gone loose and free,” he says it “as if breaking the news to someone” (240). He is remorseful that nature is taking hold of The Landing. He does not want the catfish to “take its river life back,” as it swims thought the “belfry of the church” (240).

The reason for Grandpa’s disdain is his part in representing cultivation and culture—the culture Welty systematically peels away. He cannot hold court in his regal, brocade robe, complete with cord and tassel while an animal swims through the bell tower, higher than he could ever reach.¹³ This marks a form of cleansing of the repressive masculine-centric church that is prevalent in Southern Culture. He feels the flood and all its implications is “a force of Nature and so beneath” him (242). Jenny’s grandfather is at once afraid and indignant. The natural force usurps his authority, and upon this realization, he dies.

Thus marks the story’s first entrance into the Natural World. The stage is set for a new set of rules. Welty’s story henceforth is a meditation, a fictional case study, on what would happen if two children, subject only to their natural inclinations, attempt to form a lasting connection and sustainable relationship. The reader wonders, if this attempt be futile, as is the case repeatedly in *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*, or will Jenny and Billy Floyd find a connection without the interference of church, work, and the cultivated governing Southern Culture as a whole.

Welty’s caveat remains, and the next section of “At The Landing” is a flashback. Therefore, the assumed purification is now removed in terms of narration. Jenny’s

¹³ This is not to say that Welty blames the church as a representation of God on Earth: “The sun was shining fully on the church” (*Collected Stories* 240). Her point is man’s interpretation and implementation of himself as authority.

grandfather is alive in this portion of the narrative, and his hold on her, as indicated by lines such as, “But at the door her grandfather would call her back,” is emblematic of the subjugation of women that Welty will continue to explore in the three power struggle stories discussed in this essay. The remark is also at odds with the other entity that pulls at Jenny, a “wild Floyd,” who is natural wilderness incarnate, as he seems to emerge and descend from beyond The Landing out of the wild river (241, 43). The battle between innocence—and therefore a potential connection between man and woman—and culture is vital unto itself in deciphering Welty’s continued meditation on the compatibility of men and women.

It is helpful, then, to refocus on the two main characters, Billy Floyd and Jenny. Billy Floyd is certainly wild and belonging to the Natural World for “his eyes were as bright and unconsumed as stars up in the sky” (244). Floyd is not tainted by Southern Culture. Jenny, however, is more difficult to explicate. She is from The Landing, where her meals are served to her while she sits at the gazebo with her grandfather. Conversely, Floyd fishes for his food. Also, it is noted that Jenny does not live in Natchez, a bigger and more cultivated town, yet, in the same figurative breath, she longs to go there. Jenny is transfixed by Floyd’s nature, but at once she wishes to “catch him and see him close, but not to touch him” (244). If she cultivates the wild animal that she loves, she is becoming her grandfather’s culture, in this case Southern Culture, and therefore the antithesis of Floyd. As Chronoki states, Jenny is searching for that “happy tension between the polarities of relationship” (42). Furthermore, Jenny acknowledges her difference from Floyd when she “felt it come over her dimly that her innocence had left her, since she could watch his” (*Collected* 244). Her lack of a total natural

transformation is a reminder that her grandfather has not yet died and that the story, at this point, is yet to be completely given over to the Natural World. After this realization, she returns to her grandfather—the symbol for experience. It is evident that despite Jenny's youth and her childlike actions, she is experienced enough to be removed from Floyd. Where communication was once the primary tool with which to form a connection between the sexes, it is now the systematic removal of Southern Culture and the methodical submergence in to the Natural World.

Jenny's perspective is such she can tell that "no kiss had ever brought love tenderly enough from mouth to mouth" (244). No kiss can overcome the separation between the two. This is an extension of Welty's hypothesis on innocence; sexual behavior, framed in cultural mores, results in the loss of innocence, and therefore precludes the ability of men and women to connect and for a sustainable relationship. The concept is symbolized when "Jenny and Floyd stopped and looked for a while at all the butterflies and they never touched each other" (244). The sentence can be read as meaning that Jenny and Floyd never touched one another other. But its structural duplicity allows the reader to just as easily assume that it is the butterflies that do not touch each other. The sentence's dichotomy is an attempt to naturalize the human relationship by aligning it with the butterflies, indicating that the secret to the coexistence of butterflies or a human male/female relationship is physical innocence. Moreover, when Jenny does touch Floyd, the moment is lost. Welty presents the notion of a natural innocence and its relation to cultivated mores so that she may later invalidate it, and reveal that it is human nature and not Southern Culture that taints the physicality of relationships.

Welty further explores the paradox of physical interaction when Floyd disappears into the woods. Jenny thinks that if she follows him into the woods she “would find him equally real with herself—and could not touch him then” (245). Because the reader does not know the eventual outcome of the story—that the idealized Natural World is a farce—the line is read as foreshadowing the eventual purity of the Natural World. In this naïve interpretation, Jenny, too, believes that the innocence of the wilderness would be destroyed with sexual interaction as it exists between humans with cultivated notions of morality, ethics, and sexual mores. Therefore, as the story stands, in the Natural World, they would both be “living and inviolate” (245).

When Jenny does enter the woods, she experiences an epiphany that echoes the communication stories. She realizes “how [love] would have a different story in the world if it could lose the moral knowledge of a mystery that is in the other heart,” and as a result of this mystery that “was in everyone...she would be bound to ride over and hurt, and the secrecy of life was the terror of it....But the vaunting and prostration of love told her nothing” (245). The implications of this epiphany at once alter and strengthen the ideas of love and connection put forth by “A Piece of News,” “They Key,” and “Death of A Traveling Salesman.” To begin, “moral knowledge” implies a constructed code of conduct and a system of beliefs, which humans devise. To this point, the reader is led to believe that the morality of Southern Culture is what separates man and woman, even boy and girl in Welty’s fiction. The cultural views construct the feeling of solipsism. Furthermore, the outwardly verbal bragging and lamenting of love cannot convey any secret to love or a sustainable relationship; vaunting and prostration are simply tools for cultural reinforcement and not tools for forming a connection. Welty is pointing out that

these actions often reinforce a cultural code of conduct and in doing so make the transcendence of self and the sharing of love impossible.¹⁴

Interestingly, solipsism does not extend to those of the same sex. When Jenny sees Floyd wrestle and flirt with her neighbor, Mag, she feels “what was in another heart besides her own” (246). Jenny could relate to Mag because they had both experienced the same moment of childlike innocence with Floyd. However, the fact that “Mag’s heart grew clear to [Jenny], while Floyd ran away” also alludes to a notion that the bonds of the same sex are stronger than that of the opposite sex. This marks another shift in mood with which Welty will explore further in “Music from Spain.” Still, Jenny tries to hold on to the same distant belief that the Natural World will incubate a connection between she and Floyd: “She clutched the thing in her hand, a blade of grass, and held on” (247). Hope fades, and when Jenny blows on the blade of grass it makes a “thoughtless reedy sound, and she [blows] again” (247).

As hope fades with the “thoughtless sound,” Jenny blows again, and the narrative is subsequently framed with the reminder of the grandfather’s death. The flashback is complete, and the hope for a connection as a result of purification of place is rekindled. But the hope is rekindled only to be snuffed out in an exhaustive examination. And so Welty’s story finally begins the descent into the Natural World and in doing so instantly resumes the contrast of the natural and the cultivated.

In town Jenny and Floyd experience an awkward and unnatural meeting. This is partly because Jenny “had never seen [him] between walls and under a roof and somehow it made him a different man after the one in the field (248). Jenny then remembers that

¹⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, in his essay *Culture*, printed in *Contexts for Criticism*, explores the role of culturally engrained actions in fictional characters as reinforcement of culturally normal behavior and links them to the same cultural standards in which the fiction is written.

“she was never to speak to Billy Floyd, by order of her grandfather” (249). Both these obstacles serve to juxtapose the two’s next meeting at a river, a natural place, as well as to remind the reader that what the grandfather represents, Southern Culture, is not completely, as well as to reestablish the need for the Natural World.

At the river, Jenny sits with Floyd, and where the communication stories contain lamentations of verbal communication, Welty concludes in “At The Landing,” “Nobody can say anything so true....Nobody can say, ‘Forgive the heavy heart that loves more than the tongue can say or the hands can do’ ” (249). Despite their existence at this level of the Natural World, Jenny can not connect with Floyd. This is in direct opposition to the allusions Welty once made. Still, another truth occurs to Jenny, “A clear love is *in the world*” (250). As of yet, Jenny is unable to exist within the needed state of natural innocence that fosters love and a connection with the opposite sex. But the indication that love is still possible postpones, for the moment, the story’s negative conclusion, with further submergence into the Natural World impending. Welty continues to exhaust ever-deeper levels of the Natural World in an effort, though it is not yet clear in the story, to disprove the theory of natural innocence.

With the graduation of natural levels in mind, the *dues ex machina* that causes Jenny and Floyd to descend deeper into the Natural World is a flood. Jenny and Floyd watch the rising waters from a hill and try to talk. The communication is unsuccessful (251). The story, with its characters increasingly removed from the cultivated world, begins to prove that Southern Culture is not the only thing that divides male and female; human nature is equally as divisive, and just as the only useful communication is utilitarian, so too are all innate aspects of male/ female relationships:

When [Jenny's] eyes were open and clear upon him, he violated her and still he was without care or demand and as gay as if he were still clanging the bucket at the well [with Mag]. With that same thoughtlessness of motion, that was a kind of grace, he next speared a side of wild meat...and cooked it over a fire... (251).

The Natural World impedes the sought after connection between Jenny and Floyd, the same connection searched for in Welty's communication stories, as much as does the world altered by Southern Culture. Even when Jenny tries to communicate with Floyd by eating his wild game "eagerly, looking up at him while her teeth bit to show him herself, her proud hunger, as if to please and flatter him" Floyd does not respond (252). No connection is made. Jenny realizes this and wishes for a less natural life with Floyd, one in a house, far away from the Natural World in which they find themselves. She muses that there is "a country" that will sustain the "dream of love" (252). This musing foreshadows the ultimate relegation of the Natural World as a tool for forming a connection and the eventual similarities of all cultures. Functionally, Jenny's musing pushes the story forward by mandating that Jenny continue to search for a way to connect with Floyd.

And Jenny does continue to long for a connection with Floyd. She knows now that more "love would be quiet" with no use for verbal communication (255). With this the communication stories are finally left behind in Welty's narrative quest for a sustainable relationship. But Jenny also recognizes the two worlds she and Floyd represent cannot be reconciled despite her realization: "There were two worlds....with no way to put a finger on the center of the light. And if there was a mountain, the cloud over it could not touch its heart when it traveled over" (255). Jenny is the traveler and the

need for reconciliation causes Jenny to travel further into the forest, deeper into the Natural World, to the river that has long since receded from The Landing. This is the final step in escaping whatever cultivated world that may still impede the sought-after connection between Jenny and Floyd. It is Welty's ultimate natural stage in her case study.

Jenny finds herself in the deepest layer of the Natural World, a place Northrop Frye presents as where the "world of experience [turns] into the ideal world of innocence and romance." Frye uses this world to describe a location that "contrast[s] the ritual bondage of humors." He goes on to explain that "the action [in a fictional piece]...begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphoses there in which the resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world (182).¹⁵ "At The Landing" follows this descent and return several times on several levels, each time returning without a resolution. Instead Welty uses the ultimate Natural World to contradict the idealization. Welty's case study proves the wistful musings of the prior communication stories unfounded. What takes place instead of a true connection is something more divisive. At this deepest natural level, Welty shows the instinct of men to be dark and violent—and affront to the romantics ideals. Moreover, away from the cultural mores of the South, or any civilized culture for that matter, brutality prevails.

Deep in the forest where Jenny waits for Floyd a group of men at a camp are separated from the women and pass their time primitively throwing knives at trees.

¹⁵ Frye uses the metaphor of the green world to critique Renaissance Comedy, but the romantic imagery and application are in perfect accordance with Welty's short fiction. Also, see Michael Tapp's essay *Transformative Science and Impotent Religion in Gallathea's Green World* for further explication of the green world (not yet published).

Eventually the men “put [Jenny] inside a grounded houseboat....[and one] by one the men came in to her,” raping her as she does not form any actual words of protest but instead “called out...a cry with a rising sound...at the last protested....[a] rude laugh covered her cry” (258). Jenny is completely submerged in the Natural World and even her communication is primitive. Welty’s stories once lead the reader to suspect that a natural innocence might be the solution to the absent connection between men and women. Instead, things are worse. For Welty, this may help explain the Southern Culture. It springs, after all, from innate qualities of humans, and is therefore transcendent in all cultures. But certainly “At The Landing” discredits the notion that humans are innately innocent, and nature and youth should indicate such innocence.

The graduation from communication to natural innocence is complete in that both devices are proven defective in Welty’s fiction. In “Sir Rabbit,” “The Whole World Knows,” and “Music from Spain,” Welty’s characters still search for sustainable relationships, but they cannot overcome their need to dominate each other. The rape that concludes “At The Landing” introduces a new perspective from Welty: men and women in the forthcoming stories battle with one another in attempts to form connection via ownership.

CHAPTER 4

A FURTHER STUDY OF THE CHASM BETWEEN THE SEXES AND GENDERS AND THE FIGHT FOR POWER

I situate the power struggle stories as Welty's third act. "Sir Rabbit," "The Whole World Knows," and "Music from Spain" grow increasingly desperate in an attempt to further determine and illuminate the reason no sustainable connection can be established between men and women. Welty's focus has shifted. The concentration on communication and natural innocence that consumed the first three stories of this essay has passed through "At The Landing," similar to light passing through prisms in Jenny's grandfather's house, and has been refracted into separate and stronger strains of social commentary. The power struggle stories from *The Golden Apples* remind the reader of the communication stories at times and of "At The Landing" initially, but Welty uses them mainly to explore the subjugation of women, both sexes' appropriation of power, and the transcendence of Southern Culture as seen through wanderers not unlike Jenny—all exhibited as the characters quest for a viable bond between the sexes. The only proposed solution to the chasm is marginalization—a separation from society—but as Welty illustrates in "At The Landing," it is human nature that is to blame; therefore, the solution of marginalization is refuted as quickly as it is suggested. The power struggle stories are less a proposition of how to bridge the divide between the sexes and more a study of the actualization of said divide.

Welty's violent conclusion in "At The Landing" finds its resumption in "Sir Rabbit" as it advances the case study by picking up directly where the former story ends.

Mattie Will is a young girl wandering innocently through the woods, a Natural World, when she is raped by two, young, twin boys. After the rape Mattie Will turns from the failed Natural World—the brutal human innocence of the twins—to the Preternatural World, represented by the marginal figure King MacLain, the twins’ father. In this vein, “Sir Rabbit” contains a theme that extends throughout the power struggle stories—that of exploring marginal characters and their effectiveness in terms of relationships.¹⁶ “Sir Rabbit” explores what happens when natural innocence is proven to be no escape and when the Southern Culture of the day, later proven again to be transcendent because of innate human characteristics, makes a connection between the sexes futile. As a result, Mattie Will turns away from the cultural norm and the Natural World to a counterculture with preternatural overtones and unsuccessful attempts at appropriating power.

Another way to view what happens in “Sir Rabbit” is the inability of the “real world” to hold within it any sort of male/female connection worth sustaining. From “A Piece of News,” which touches lightly on the mystical with its mysterious storm, to “They Key” and the introduction of its red-headed stranger and his mystical qualities, to “Death of A Traveling Salesman” and the other-worldliness of the married couple, each character or event that indicates the secret to a viable relationship is preternatural. The tendency to look outside the realm of normal and toward the abnormal grows progressively strong. “Sir Rabbit” contains tones of the preternatural, but it is a transition to realistic marginalities that the story represents, a transition “The Whole World Knows” and “Music from Spain” advance and cement.

Similar in style to “At The Landing,” the narrative of “Sir Rabbit” is framed by a flash back, which takes place in the same woods as does the entire of the story. The

¹⁶ See Susan V. Donaldson’s “Recovering Otherness in The Golden Apples.”

flashback serves to reestablish the errant ideal of natural innocence explored in “At The Landing” and, in turn, allow the rest of the story to exist because of its initial failure. The flashback begins as Mattie Will, thinking at first that she sees King MacLain, a wayward town father, finds herself in the company of his two twin sons. After realizing the figure is not who she thought was approaching, Mattie Will “planted her hoe in front of her toes and stood her ground...too old—fifteen—to call out now that something was happening” (331). With her masculine tool in hand, she attempts to appropriate and exert a power stereotypically foreign to her sex. Equally paradoxical are the description of the twins as they rape Mattie Will—their “soft baby-like heads, and the nuzzle of [their] cool noses” (332). As we find in “At The Landing,” youth does not equal purity, and neither does the natural setting in which the rape takes place. Yet, after the rape, all three eat candy that the twins planted prior to the rape, a childlike action. The forethought, however, brings a “pall on all three,” a sentiment for which only experience can allow (332). Even more, the three are described as holding their candy in “their mouths like old men’s pipes” (332). Located in a similar Natural World as Jenny’s rape, the paradoxes are a repeated as an affront to Welty’s prior ideology.

Welty will no longer patronize the Natural World or allow the innocence of youth any form of extended meditation. The tone of the story is one of initial recognition but also accepted defeat, and Mattie Will’s actions, or lack thereof, reflects Welty’s language. It takes a realized lack of spontaneity—the planted candy—in order to drain the moment of its charm. And prior to the description of the disappointing pall, there is a line that indicates a mundane feeling about the entire ordeal: “She might have felt more anger than confusion, except that to keep the twins straight had fallen her lot” (332). The

event is accepted as ordinary. There is no violent description of rape, just a few paragraphs that make the experience sound like a juvenile wrestling match. Absent is the dramatic language that describes the just-missed moments of connection in the prior four stories. It would seem that Jenny's cry of last protest in "At The Landing" has been fully silenced. Not even a "rude laugh" remains, just a general acceptance of the way things are.

The detached tone is on par with several preternatural descriptions throughout the story. King MacLain appears eerily from the "waist up" and Mattie Will notices the June bug, which Welty describes in the one-off fashion similar the entire story as remarkable because it is a "late June bug" (335). After the flashback, Junior, Mattie Will's husband, believes he is shot dead, despite the pellets from King McLain's gun only peppering his hat. King McLain is described as the "preternatural month of June (337).¹⁷ These things are out of sink with nature, and they serve as indicators to the story's preternatural and progressively marginal setting.

King MacLain, the marginal character that intrigues Mattie Will so, is described in a preternatural tone, but King McLain is also marginal because he refuses to seek the life that would otherwise be placed on him by Southern Culture. His marginal status attracts Mattie Will because she is looking for the connection sought in the first four stories, but she is the result of those stories and therefore she knows her vehicle must be different. Nature and culture cannot sustain such a connection. When the twins leave her with the suddenly "parting word....Now" the sexes are divided for Mattie Will and the chasm is too great to bridge in traditional ways. Thus, despite evidence that King

¹⁷ On page 332 of "Sir Rabbit," the twins are said to smell of "recent lightning-bug," but it is "so early in the year." While this may seem in line with other preternatural descriptions, I believe it is simply symbolic of the young age of loss of innocence.

MacLain is unable to provide a sustaining relationship, she is attracted to his marginality. But, it is helpful to arrive at this conclusion by following the story from whence the flashback ends and the narrative including King MacLain and Mattie Will's husband, Junior, begins.

Mattie Will follows behind Junior and Blackstone, Junior's apparent servant, whose location in the marching line is ahead of Mattie Will, which signifies a lower status for women. The two men shoot old ammunition in the woods, whereupon they run into King MacLain, who claims to be "in the habit of hunting these parts" (333). Instantly, Junior is worried that it is "young girl-wives not tied down yet [and] could generally be found following after their husbands" that King MacLain is actually hunting (335). It is important to note Junior's nervousness as he tells King MacLain, "'Ain't e'er young lady folling after me, that you can catch aholt of'" (335). Mattie Will recognizes Junior's insecurity and misplaced ownership at the same time she realizes that Junior would beat her and accuse her of lying if she told him about being raped by the twins. At this point, male insecurity is introduced as a reason for female subjugation. As a result, Mattie Will is objectified as a prop fought over by the two men.

Alluding to the fact that there are too many males in the woods, Mattie Will comically "sighs, 'One more redbird'" (335). Noteworthy about the two competing men is the confidence one shows above the other. Both men view Mattie Will as game for the hunt, but King MacLain is more enticing because of his authority, an authority gained because of his marginalized status. And once again, talking—communication—is no longer an option to usurp the mounting obstacle: if "she had put anything in words" there would be trouble, Mattie Will realizes (333).

King MacLain baits Mattie Will by saying, “Won’t you come out and explain something mysterious to me, young lady?” (335). This mysterious thing King MacLain speaks of is not the same secret to a connection explored in the communication stories. The mystery King McLain’s speaks of “sounded as if he’d just thought of it, and called it mysterious” (335). His mystery is somewhat arbitrary. This interaction exists on a different level than Welty’s prior fiction discussed in this essay, a marginal level without the restraints of the church, as suggested when King McLain tells Mattie Will, “I don’t think you are [a Holifield],” her name a combination of two oppressive staple of Southern Culture—the Church and field (336). King MacLain further entices Mattie Will by telling her that she, too, is marginal. Subsequently, Mattie Will begins to think condescendingly of King MacLain’s wife as “a sweet-looking Presbyterian albino lady” (336). This elevates Mattie Will’s power status by marginalizing her in comparison to Mrs. MacLain. What is more, the condescending tone of the description is reinforced as the narrator states, “Nothing was her fault,” which removes Mrs. MacLain’s power since she cannot affect circumstances (336). The description of Mrs. MacLain also serves to remind the reader that King MacLain left his wife and therefore reinforces his marginal status. On the whole, this interaction takes place provocatively without the restraints of societal custom marking a transition of focus to the margins of society, which is this story’s briefly proposed tool for establishing a sustainable connection between men and women.

The transition, however, proves to be no solution to opposing sexes. Mattie Will falls to the preternatural dominance of King MacLain in the same way she fell to the natural brutality of the twins. Just as Mattie Will realizes as she is raped by the twins that

“from now on having a visit go the visitor’s way would come before giving trouble,” she also realizes as King McLain rapes her that “no matter what happened to her...disappointments are not to be borne by Mr. McLain” (338). The culmination of the inability of Mattie Will to connect in a Natural World with the twins and the inability to connect with Junior in the world of Southern Culture has lead Mattie Will to submit “to another way to talk,” figuratively speaking.

Still, Mattie Will does not find fault with King MacLain but excites in existing only in relation to him. Unable to form a viable relationship with King MacLain, Mattie Will is now in search of power over the opposite sex. She is no longer “Mrs. Junior Holifield nor Mattie Will Sojourner; now she was something she had always heard of”—“Mr. McLain’s Doom, or Mr. McLain’s Weakness” (338). What was once lain at the feet of Southern Culture and proven to be the same in the Natural World is now found to be true in the margins of society. Attempting to establish her own power is no longer an option for Mattie Will. What is left for her is the self worth she gains by associating herself with an elevated character. Appropriating a masculine power, marginalizing her self, and rationalizing the natural brutality of the twins all fail to empower Mattie Will. Her last source of worth comes from being King MacLain’s weakness. Mattie Will views herself as the object that causes King MacLain to loose control. The outcome is not, however, a viable relationship. In the end, Mattie Will is made subordinate in the natural, the cultural, and marginal worlds in which she exists, despite her perceived causality to King MacLain.

“The Whole World Knows” and “Music from Spain” are similar in theme to “Sir Rabbit,” but Welty’s further exploration focuses on the male’s motivation in his

dysfunctional quest for a relationship. Why do men rape? Why do they subjugate their perceived opposite sex? Why, after these establishing actions, do they marginalize themselves in search of something more?

Welty's subjects are the twins who rape Mattie Will—Randall and Eugene MacLain. Their respective journeys find them attempting to hold onto the power they have over women while simultaneously marginalizing themselves with respect to Southern Culture in a search of more fulfilling relationships in more conducive environments. What they find is what Welty initialized with "At The Landing"—human nature transcends place. The revelation in "At The Landing" is reiterated when the impetus behind Southern Culture, human nature, is found to be the same impetus in the societies to which Randall and Eugene escape. Welty makes her case for a universal dilemma, and in the next two stories, Pitavy-Souques' words are never more relevant: Welty is not to be denied her powerful ability "to show (or write) about human beings...[their]...universal feelings and the weight of their plight" (105).

The title, "The Whole World Knows," is at once in reference to the availability of the main character Randall MacLain's thoughts, as well as the fact that Welty continues to locate her social commentary increasingly in the public sphere. The communication stories showed a negotiation primarily between two people. "At The Landing" ends with a communal rape. "Sir Rabbit" is an exhibit of a group dynamic and its communal struggle with a relationship. "The Whole World Knows" is an acknowledgment that the power struggle between two human beings of the opposite sex is not unique to one person and does not exist in a vacuum but rather is a vacuum which sucks in those around Ran and his estranged wife Jinny.

Conversely, “The Whole World Knows” is limited by a first person point of view. While this allows Welty and the reader to explore the motives of a man, which in the previous works has remained unexplained, it also displays his solipsism with regards to the rest of the characters in the story. The reader can know Ran’s thoughts but, like Ran, cannot know anyone else’s. The reader is forced to see the plot and understand the other characters through Ran. The result of these observational limitations and the voyeuristic peek inside Ran’s head is a revelation that the sexes are not just separated but at battle with one another, appropriating and exerting power.

The two battling sexes are epitomized by the two opposing influences inside Ran’s head—his mother and father. Emblematic of cultural pervasiveness of the church and religion, Ran periodically prays to his father as the first line of the story reads, “Father, I wish I could talk to you” (375). Next he remembers his mother’s attempt to control him: “You could come back to MacLain and live with me,” she guiltily chides (375). Ran claims he is unable to return to his mother, and his longing aligns him instead with his father.

Religion is not the only hangover from the previous stories. The ever-present work of the Southern Culture looms in the background as Ran “stood for some time looking out at the cotton field...until it nearly put him to sleep” (375). But, Ran has a reaction to the field that indicates his search for marginality: “[the cotton field] woke [him] up like a light turned on in his face” (375). Ran recognizes what he views as a limitation to his happiness. After his epiphany, Ran begins to defy the southern tradition. When he is told to go back to his wife, he instead picks up Maideen, his new girlfriend.

Like Mattie Will and King MacLain, Maideen is attracted to the marginality of Ran, and she makes her own attempts to appropriate power and appear marginal in order to attract him. She is from another community, and should be, by birth, marginal with respect to the MacLain locals. “ ‘Look! Citified,’ ” cries Maideen, as she makes her own attempt to appear marginal and therefore powerful and attractive (376). That she went to junior college and obtained an education is an appropriation of stereotypically masculine power. But she is unsuccessful as Ran views her as nothing more than “country-prim” and lacking any exotic nature (376).

Maideen is unable to establish power with words, either. When she speaks, Ran says that “she never said a word except a kind one,” and therefore “her company was next to nothing” (377). Maideen’s appearance, education, speech, and kindness do not make her a viable option in Ran’s mind. He is using her for his own display of power against Jinny, who has asserted her power via infidelity. And although Maideen does not want Ran to use her in an effort to make Jinny jealous, she eventually recognizes her subordinate role and submits to his plan. No where in the story do characters try to establish relationship based on equality and connection. Instead, they attempt to own the other by gaining and exerting power.

Jenny is an interesting figure in the power brokerage because she both appropriates masculinity as well as utilizes her femininity in order to exert power. Ran and Maideen enter Jinny’s parent’s house and Jinny “stood with her legs apart, cutting off locks of her hair at the mirror” (378). She cuts her hair in accordance with masculine tradition and takes a strong stance with her legs apart—a masculine posture. And while Jinny’s open stance is not lady-like, it does abstractly reveal her female genitalia,

symbolic of the power she exerts by using her sex and sexuality over Ran. But even this is an appropriation of something only expected, and generally accepted, in men. By embracing her sexual prowess, Jinny appropriates the attitude traditionally exhibited in men.

Jinny further defies expectations by using what Ran describes as “stork-shaped” scissors (378). The scissors are an affront to the idea that a baby would, as alluded to in “Sir Rabbit” tie her to Ran, as well as a reminder of what only her sex can provide him. Jinny appropriates more masculine power by asserting herself over the other woman in the room, Maideen, telling her to come “in *too* and take off [her] gloves” (378). By telling Maideen to take off her feminine white gloves, Jinny attempts to empower Maideen, but by commanding her Jinny simultaneously subjugates Maideen. Jinny is the dominant force and has achieved dominance by appropriating and exerting power, therefore marginalizing herself in stature.

Ran’s reaction to Jinny’s power is mixed. He degrades her lack of femininity when he leers at her “excuses for breasts” (385). Larger breasts would make Jinny more feminine and then less powerful to Ran. Yet he still prays to his father, “I wish I could go back” (378). Ran remembers “he loved [Jinny] a lot” when she subjugated him by humming in a tone that would go “low and soft to complete disparagement” (385). Ran is not attracted to the stereotypically weaker sex of the South and becomes tired of Maideen’s subordinate nature as she is “always waiting on [him]” (386). But Ran is also threatened by Jinny’s dominance and has delusions of murdering her and her new boyfriend, Woodrow Spights. By killing Jinny, Ran would assert his power over her. By

killing Woody he asserts his power over Jinny, the competing male, but also proves his own weakness in and to himself:

And I proved the male human body—it has too positive, too special a shape, you know, not to be hurt—it could be finished up pretty fast. It just takes one good loud blow after another—Jinny should be taught that (382).

Ran views his sex as “positive” and “special” but recognizes his fragility, as well. He sees that his demise would prove Jinny wrong in asserting her power the way that she has done and thereby passively reestablish his power over her. The morbid thought foreshadows his future suicide attempt, but at the moment Ran’s only outlet for which to display his power is Maideen.

The contradictory feelings in Ran are again symbolized by the thoughts of his two parents. And it is his mother’s voice that reinforces the societal guidelines in him. Ran remembers her words, “ ‘If I thought you’d ever go back to Jinny Stark , I couldn’t stand it....The whole world knows what she did to you. It’s different when it’s the man’ ” (390). Ran knows that he cannot go back to Jinny out of pride and custom, but the subsequent life that is forced on him is equally distasteful. He hates what he will have with Maideen. When Maideen explains that her mother is Mattie Will, the young girl he and his twin raped, he is reminded of his past life, which he equally hates.

Ran is tired of being required to play the role he has always played. He keeps forgetting about the old ways, the “eternal politeness of the people [he] hope[s] not to know.” In the footsteps of the marginalized King MacLain, his father, Ran leaves Morgana. He escapes to Vicksburg, where “suddenly all sensation returned” (387). Unlike his father, Ran cannot go alone and takes Maideen with him. Like his father,

marginalizing himself does not remove the innate human characteristic within him. Ran assumes that his problems are the cotton fields, and southern tradition, but as Welty illustrates in “At The Landing” and “Sir Rabbit” the problem lies in the innate qualities of humans. Miss Perdita is right when she tells Ran, “ ‘We’re all human on earth’ ” (376). Miss Lizzie is equally correct when she tells him, “You men. You got us beat in the end” (385). No amount of marginalization or extraction can remove the need for Ran to heal himself and establish a relationship (albeit not a sustainable or viable one) by subjugating Jinny.

In an attempt to prove his power and marginal characteristic, Ran claims not to want to share his bed with a woman. Ran tells Maideen that he “needs the whole bed” and fires his gun at his head (391). The gun, however, misfires. Since he cannot prove his power to Jinny and, more importantly cannot diminish hers, via suicide, Ran instead exerts his power over Maideen by taking her virginity.

Maideen is hurt by Ran’s exertion and cries like “a child...after punishment” (392). And when Ran falls asleep, Maideen makes her last bid for empowerment by appropriating a newly observed masculine trait; she shoots herself. She proves her power over Ran as he tried to prove his over Jinny, but like Mattie Will was through King MacLain, Maideen only existed as Ran’s weakness, his doom.

The power struggle between the sexes prohibits a viable connection. It is a game they play, and as Miss Lizzie describes in her conversation with Ran about bridge, the secret is to know what your partner is holding. But, as Miss Perdita explains, women will “never know what ails” men. The impossibility of overcoming innate human solipsism

and the innate human need of power is the obstacle to the solution Welty continues to search for in her stories.

“Music from Spain” is the actualization of the idea first expressed in “The Key” and later in “At The Landing” and “The Whole World Knows.” Albert and Ellie thought they could find their true connection in Niagara Falls. Jenny dreamt of a house in a country far away where she and Floyd could establish a similar connection. Even Ran could only get as far as Victoria. All are places assumed to be outside the ramifications of Southern Culture. Eugene MacLain has moved out of the South, to San Francisco. Exotic purple eucalyptus trees replace Magnolia and crape myrtles. Classical guitar concerts replace evening bridge and croquet. The search for a heterosexual connection is subsidized with the search for a homosexual connection. But just as Welty placed the story of “At The Landing” in the Natural World in order to disprove the ideal of natural innocence, she sets “Music from Spain” in a city that is in every way marginal, as compared to the American South, in order to disprove the lingering idea that one can form a sustainable relationship with the opposite sex by escaping the oppression of the South. She uses these locales in order to further prove that human nature transcends cultural boundaries.

And Welty does not wait long to begin further disproving the myth of her onetime scapegoat, Southern Culture. In the first paragraph, after a passing comment by his wife, Eugene slaps her in the face. “She was older” and was a large woman, we are told, and whatever else may be threatening about Eugene’s wife, Emma, causes Eugene to exert his power with physical force (393). He cannot understand why he does this, but the

“act” proves “it had been a part of him” (394). In fact, Eugene “struck her because he wanted another love” (395).

Within this marginal setting, Eugene feels he must marginalize himself even more to escape what he thought he had already escaped—boundaries set upon him by culture. Like Ran and his cotton field, Eugene realizes that work is such a boundary and it is suddenly “beautifully clear” to him—that he should not go to work,” and the lift of fog in the city...brought him a longing now like that of vague times in past...in Mississippi, to see the world” (396). Thus, he embarks on his misguided journey to usurp his societal constraints.

His journey, in large part, is to find something other than Emma, a woman, to love. He recognizes that they are too separate to form a bond as he understands that the death of Emma’s child, Fan, affected her more than him, and it “was womanlike” (399). Despite mourning Fan as well, he could not share the experience with her. Eugene decides to “seek a stranger” with whom to share himself—shades of Ruby, to be sure (400).

The Spaniard, who Eugene and Emma saw play the guitar one evening, crosses Eugene’s path. All the Spaniard’s marginal characteristics make him attractive to Eugene for . He is foreign; he is the “only black-clad figure on” the street; he is larger than the rest of the people (401). The only thing that disappoints Eugene is that the Spaniard does not speak English. However, communication is not the key to this story. “Music from Spain” is concerned with actions, more specifically the performances, and lacking speech precludes the two’s ability to “thank or deprecate,” a good thing proven by Maideen and Ran (402). Jenny’s prophetic words that “more love would be quiet” seem to apply. But

it is the Spaniard's occupation as a performer that is most important to the story. Just as Eugene's brutality toward Emma was a performance, an action that defined him, the Spaniard's solo recital and ultimately (as is evident as the story progresses) his gender is a performance, an action that defines him. He controls who he is and can be softer than Emma, who Eugene finds hard and intimidating. Eugene delights in his realization that there is "another kind of Spaniard....his prize again....The artist" (402). With this, however, the reader is forewarned that despite any amount of performance, the end result will be the same. Even though Eugene attempts to marginalize himself and find a connection with the same sex, his motives will prohibit that connection. Eugene objectifies the Spaniard as a prize and takes comfort in the Spaniard's stereotypically feminine gender performance. Eugene is only concerned with finding a partner exemplifies the gender role he believes Emma should exemplify. Eugene searches for a partner whom he can subjugate, a method proven destructive in the prior power struggle stories.

With this in mind, Eugene leads the Spaniard around the city by the arm and buys his lunch. Eugene is performing the role of the dominant masculine figure in the relationship. But when the Spaniard begins to appropriate the dominant role, Eugene glimpses the error of a hierarchical relationship. The Spaniard shows his dominance by leading Eugene across the street and patronizingly patting him on the head. The transformation causes the Spaniard to seem "to increase in size" and develop "a great fatherly chest" (415).

Eugene then notices a cat stalking another creature and wonders, "Didn't it matter which poor, avid life took the gaze and which gave it?" (416). He realizes that the

answer is that it does not matter because there is an underlying level of equality that entitles anyone, man or woman, to the ownership of a gaze. Eugene's epiphany alters his reality. He can not lead the Spaniard by the arm anymore. He can only "feebly" hold on (422). He sees a couple walking and laughing on the beach, and wanders again, "was that happiness?" (422). Now Eugene recognizes what Welty indicates by her description of the couple as "a man and girl" (422). Welty does not use "man and woman" to describe the couple. Eugene sees they are not laughing but that their teeth are "bared like hunger or stress" (422). The couple's relationship is based on the human need to dominate the opposite sex. But Eugene does not need to perform the masculine role anymore, and when Spaniard lifts him up and his hat flies away, Eugene is "without a burden" as he loses his gender defining hat, reminiscent of R.J. Bowman (423). He is free to perform any gender role he chooses and does not have to slap Emma in order to maintain their relationship. Eugene wishes to return to Emma now that he is comfortable being enveloped by her, allowing her to return "him awesome favors in full vigor, with not a ghost of the salt of tears (423). He is comfortable with her strength.

It is no longer necessary for the Spaniard to allow Eugene to exert his dominant gender upon him, and when Eugene finds himself buying another meal for the Spaniard, he realizes he must return home and reconcile with Emma. But when he does, his innate need for dominance returns. All Eugene sees is "feminine talking-away" (425). In theory Eugene can recognize what must be done for a sustainable relationship, but in practice he is blinded by the perceived appropriate gender role of the opposite sex.

Welty no longer searches for a way to create an equal playing field on which the sexes can connect. Instead she has paired down the reason for the inability to establish a

sustainable relationship—the need to dominate the opposite sex, more specifically, the need for men to dominate women.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

More of Welty's stories than the six discussed in this essay deal with relationships. But these six represent a progression in attitude toward relationships in Welty's short fiction. Peter Schmidt describes her fiction as "more process, an active verb, than a noun that can be fixed" (354). "A Piece of News," "The Key," and "Death of a Traveling salesman depict Southern Culture as the reason why men and women exist in separate linguistic realms. Each successive story builds on the idea that possible solution is present. Each story revealing a little more hope than the last, innocence being the avenue for optimism.

"At The Landing" is a closer look at the ideal of natural innocence. Welty places the characters in stages that gradually becomes a pure and Natural World that exists completely separate from Southern Culture. In its purest form, the Natural World is still unable to foster a sustainable relationship. As a result, Welty refutes her claim that Southern Culture is to blame. "At The Landing" presents human nature as brutal and unable to produce a connection between the sexes.

The power struggle stories begin with "Sir Rabbit" as Welty's denouncement of a innocent possibility is reiterated. The story quickly establishes the need for marginal existence. It just as quickly proves that marginality is no solution as well. "The Whole World Knows" gives the reader a unique first person perspective inside a male figure as he deals with appropriation of power by women, and, as a result, his own marginal leanings. "Music from Spain" extends the idea of appropriation and introduces the idea of gender performance. With this, the notion of choice in relationships is introduced as

the last hope for a sustainable relationship. Furthermore, each of the three power struggle stories from *The Golden Apples* locates Welty's social commentary in the public sphere, symbolizing the universality of these themes.

The thematic transcendence in her fiction is mirrored by the growing acceptance of Eudora Welty as more than a regional writer. And while it is true that she "is as quintessentially Southern a writer as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy," three years after the publication date of *The Golden Apples*, Granville Hicks wrote an essay on Welty in The English Journal in which he noted of her, "A writer can be provincial in the geographical sense without being intellectually or aesthetically provincial....[Furthermore] the deeper one goes into the heart of a region, the more one transcends its geographical boundaries" (qtd. in Ross 139, Hicks 468).

But Welty's ultimate goal was not to transcend the South but to "transcend isolation, if only momentarily, in shared acts of imagination" (Mars 36). She had hope for such transcendence. Unfortunately, judging by her short fiction, it would seem that the only thing truly transcendent is the ineptitude of people to find sustainable relationships.

Virgie Rainey, the main character in the last story in *The Golden Apples*, "never doubted that all the opposites on earth were close together, love close to hate, living to dying; but of them all, hope and despair were the closest blood" (452). There is no doubt, then, why, so many of Welty's stories end with hope, immediately followed by futility.

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